Social Change.
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CHRONIQUE BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

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Because societies and cultures are products of historical processes they are likewise open and subject to perpetual change, which is a constant rather than extraordinary process. ‘Social change’ refers to a broad and ill-defined concept that does not connote a distinct area of enquiry. Rather, a focus on ‘change’ allows for an infinite variety of areas for discussion and analysis. Indeed, social change has long provided perhaps the single most important frame of reference in anthropological studies. In their immodest quest for generalities, the founders of modern anthropology sought to explain societal differences under the rubric of evolution and ethnology, which then spawned particularistic and diffusionist arguments, equally inspired by the notion of social change. There next arose an overwhelming concern to explain precisely the inverse: not how societies changed, but how they constrained individual actors toward conformity to norms and values which perpetrated the status quo. We learned of the positive functions, in Radcliffe-Brown’s sense, of seemingly disruptive social phenomena. In the immediate post-World War I decades in American anthropology, ethnographers organized their data around the odd metaphor ‘culture contact’ and produced studies on acculturation—primarily discourses on the indigenous adaptations to imperialism and colonialism. British practitioners next considered how indigenous peoples, especially in Africa and Melanesia, were likewise ‘changed’ by external forces, a focus which led to the consideration of the strategies individuals adopted in performing supposedly inosculate roles. A short while later, certain materialistically inclined anthropologists developed the hypothesis that ‘progressive’ change was positively associated with increased animal protein consumption! In short, we have in a way claimed a distinct expertise in studying something we cannot specifically define and have adduced a myriad of theories to account for what it is we study.

On a more positive note, the three books under review have not been inspired by the vogue-ish interest in ‘development’ or directed social change but instead represent admirable attempts to account for what is perpetual: the interrelationship of history and ethnography, or, in other words, the study of social process through the examination of praxis.

Wendy James studied social anthropology at Oxford during the tenure of the late Evans-Pritchard as Professor, and has carried out intensive and extensive research in the eastern-central Sudan. Likewise, Arens, an American anthropologist who did his graduate training at the University of Virginia, completed the standard stint of ethnographic participant observation in rural northern Tanzania.


Cahiers d'Études africaines, 77-78, XX-1-2, pp. 181-183.
By contrast, Francis Deng is one of a growing body of scholars who writes of a people from the enviable yet problematic perspective of native informant.

This is James’ first monograph on the people called Uduk who live on the borderland between the Northern and Southern Sudan. It is a fine example of the type of study one has come to expect from Oxford-trained social anthropologists. As a work that successfully merges mythical themes with the standard inventory of ethnographic data, ‘Kwanim pa’ bears comfortable resemblances with Godfrey Lienhardt’s masterly study of the Dinka. The author’s principal focus is on the genesis and survival of the Uduk peoples. She writes: ‘Myth and history are clearly not “the same thing”. But nor is it permissible to separate them, regarding history as what actually happened and myth as fictional representation. The Uduk representation of immediate historical experience bears a very close relation to the way in which they see the total character of their society in its moral relations with other peoples.’ Apart from the fact that this is the first full-length monograph on the Uduk, the book deserves a wide reading for it offers a model for general ethnographic description and analysis.

‘An Ethnographic Remnant’—the Uduk number only some ten thousand—is the title of the first chapter which surveys certain data pertaining to Uduk history. Their vacillating contacts with Nilotic-speaking groups to the south is evidenced in a number of cultural practices, notably the nomenclature of agriculture. The relationship between myth and ethnicity is examined in greater detail in the second chapter. Subsistence is the general topic of the third chapter and here James provides insights into the organization of productive labour and the moral significance of commensality and reciprocity. A regional exchange system involving goats, pigs, sesame and occasionally cattle articulates social interaction with neighbouring peoples, all of whom appear to be only marginally involved in the wider Sudanese market economy. James then discusses women and birth groups, socialization, marriage and residence topics which can be more fully understood in conjunction with three of six appendices. The Uduk present an interesting ethnological problem in that they represent a sea of matrilineality amidst an ocean of patrilineality, and here James’ appreciation of social change and history is most cogent. ‘Now it is possible to think in the abstract of a situation in which all transactions over the fertility of women are suspended, or made impossible for some reason. The latent principle of natural linkage through women may well be “uncovered” and become the dominant principle of the kinship system. People will order and rationalize their relationships in matrilineal terms, in the absence of economic-political groups built up from those transactions which fragment the matriline [. . .] I think it very likely that this is what happened [. . .] through the circumstances of a history which has threatened the existence of the people, the matrilineal idea came to be a means whereby, in theory and in practice, the people were able to survive political defeat, and, almost, social extermination’ (pp. 254-255). In other words, survival for the Uduk is social change.

Evans-Pritchard asserted that most ethnographic accounts were too dull and dry to entertain the curiosity of anthropologists with no special interest in the area considered. He intimated—increasingly, I think, in his later years—that the ‘flesh and blood’ of subject peoples was lost in abstracted accounts of kinship, politics and so on. By contrast, this monograph offers a refreshing re-affirmation of what first-rate social anthropology can be, uncluttered by polemical attempts at theory, allowing room enough for living people to emerge in the discourse of analysis.

Deng’s monograph—his sixth on the Dinka—is similarly concerned with ethnic identity and survival. It is essentially an analysis of the words of a number of respected Dinka leaders, who recall their peoples’ history, offer interpretations of those events in contemporary terms and speculate about the prospects for peaceful coexistence with Northern Arabized Sudanese. The central focus of the latter exercise is provided by the experiences of the recently ended civil war in Sudan.
The majority of the interviews were conducted in the course of official ceremonies marking the first year of peace in seventeen years of independent Sudanese history. Curiously, there appears a notable lack of consensus about the details of Dinka history; likewise no single sentiment typifies their expectations for the future. A considerable portion of the book is devoted to the analysis of policy considerations at the local level. The texts of the chiefs also serve as a vehicle for discussing wider-ranging issues confronting the modern Sudan, including ethnic and cultural identity, nationalism, economic development and planned social change. Deng's unique experience in academic, diplomatic and governmental pursuits ensures the necessary authenticity in the study; he is especially sensitive to the fact that the Dinka see themselves confronted by a host of compromising political dilemmas. Their Northern Sudanese neighbours were for centuries despised foreigners who carried out slaving forays into Dinka country, while their descendants are now their countrymen. With a certain measure of astonishment the various factions that monitored the implementation of the Addis Ababa peace accord were united in their opinion that there had been no deviation from the planned repatriation and resettlement of Southern Sudanese refugees, as well as considerably less violence than many had feared.

The humanistic approach Deng employs makes this an engrossing ethnographic study although that appears to be at best a secondary concern of the author. The book is a candid portrait of the social effects that shifting and uncertain political alignments can produce. If it is possible to maintain the distinction between being a conformist abroad and a critic at home, Deng commands a unique vantage point for choosing the latter. This is a most timely work and is one that will be appreciated by humanistically inclined social scientists, especially those whose interests draw them away from the relative comfort of academic retroreflection into the uncertainties of inevitable and often violent processes of social change.

Arens' slim volume makes an important contribution to the on-going debate on the nature of inter- and intra-ethnic identification in modern Africa by developing a focus on the rural hinterland as opposed to the more common urban approach. The primary research site was the village of Mto wa Mbu, founded in the 1920's by a handful of migrants who had already been away from their various homelands while in the service of the former German colonial administration. During the past fifty years, this original population grew to approximately 3,500 as new settlers arrived from throughout Tanzania in search of more productive arable land. As of 1969, individuals from seventy different ethnic backgrounds were residents in the town. The essential thesis of the study is a concern with the common adoption by these people of the ethnic label Waswahili, or 'Swahili people', and the manner in which social relationships have formed through intermarriage and religious affiliation. With reference to the idea of social change, Arens suggests that the assumption which contrasts a 'traditional' hinterland with a dynamic urban center is misleading, and has been promoted primarily because of the paucity of data on communities of the former type. He writes that certain aspects of change in the form of modernization are expressed more vigorously in the countryside than in the city, intimating that cities provide a more conservative environment since they tend to restrict the individual's political commitment to an ethnic group rather than the State. 'Since many of the independent African States are emphasising rural, as opposed to urban development, our expectations regarding the appearance of changing forms of organization show a greater concern for social processes taking place in the countryside.' Throughout the study one sees a comfortable merging of substantive data with social theory. A number of case histories supplement the analysis.

Taken together, these three monographs augur a very positive trend in the discipline of social anthropology and provide additional confirmation of the assertion that the respective spheres of history and anthropology are indissociable.